



---

# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Sweet Discipline

---

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MAY 13, 2018

---

**N**obody wants it. Everybody needs it. It can come to us from external sources, but has the greatest impact when it comes from within. Lives and careers, marriages and families, companies and organizations have crashed and burned when it is lacking. The writer of the New Testament book called Hebrews lays it out bluntly and clearly for us. Let's see what it says.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup>And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
<sup>6</sup>because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

<sup>7</sup>Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? <sup>8</sup>If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. <sup>9</sup>Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! <sup>10</sup>They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup>No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.  
<sup>13</sup>“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Hebrews 12:4-13

## What is Discipline?

Our topic for this morning is **discipline**. The word has multiple meanings and understandings, and to grasp its significance we need to look at it from multiple directions—the way a jeweler or gemologist studies a diamond by examining it from all sides. Discipline is often misunderstood as being the same thing as punishment, but they are very different in their purpose and intent. Punishment is the inflicting of pain, inconvenience, suffering or depravation as a result of some misconduct or violation of rules. Its purpose is negative. It seeks nothing more than justice or retribution. Discipline is the imposition of restrictions or consequences for an educational or transformative purpose. When discipline is administered, its goal is to improve the person or other creature being disciplined.

The “lower” or sinful part of our human nature will try to avoid discipline at all costs. Our natural instincts, uncontrolled and unguided, always prefer to seek pleasure and ease, to be lazy, to obey our momentary whims and emotions, to avoid pain and effort, and to seek unrestrained license to do whatever we feel like doing. We can’t begin to have an informed conversation about the purpose and role of discipline in life unless we acknowledge that truth of our nature. The profoundly naïve idealists who think that mankind is always good and always chooses well are living on a fantasy planet of their own imagining. On this earth, humans left to their own impulses will usually crash and burn.

The writer of this portion of the Bible called Hebrews lays out the facts unmistakably. Everyone needs discipline. It is essential to success in anything in life. When properly embraced, it brings long-term benefits to individuals and to society that nothing else can produce. No matter how unpopular and politically incorrect it may be, today

I proclaim that from God's perspective discipline is a sweet and beautiful thing.

What team ever won a championship or Olympic athlete ever won a medal without discipline? What company ever designed and manufactured world-class products that produced consistent profitability without discipline up and down the ladder of the corporation? Who ever earned a degree from a rigorous academic institution—no matter how intellectually gifted they might be—without putting in the hard work?

### **An Expression of Love**

Discipline is a highly useful quality. But Hebrews 12:6 adds an even more powerful principle: Discipline, when rightly administered, is a tangible and effective form of love. On this Mother's Day, when our entire culture pauses to celebrate a woman's love for children, it is important to state that love is not best expressed as pure emotion. Love is seen most profoundly in action. And the love that has the greatest impact on children is not a permissive love that allows them to follow their worst instincts. The greatest mother-love and father-love is the one that provides godly discipline. Our Heavenly Father, the perfect role model of absolute love for all human parents, is described in this way in our text: "The Lord disciplines the one He **loves**." For people who are imperfect and immature (either physically, emotionally or spiritually), discipline is, in fact, the most helpful and needed kind of love.

He is a renowned former star athlete with a not-unfamiliar story. His father abandoned the home when he was a baby. His mother had to work two jobs to put food on the table, so she was rarely around. He grew up on the streets, molded by his peer culture. Because he was bigger, faster and stronger than the other boys his age, he could bully and get away with it. And he was also the star of every sport on the playground and in high school (the starting running back). A major football program offered him a scholarship, which offered him a way out of the slums.

But the first day of his freshman football camp he encountered something he had never known before: strict and inflexible discipline, from a coach who was both compassionate and yet unwavering in his requirements. It was a shock to this boy, who had never had a father or father-figure and had lived an undisciplined life. It was exactly what he needed, and what he longed for deep inside—though he didn't know it. After flourishing in college football and in the pros, and then going on to success in a business career and a healthy marriage and family life, how do you suppose he now looks back on that coach—the man who slapped those tough rules and consequences on him and never allowed him to get away with anything? Do you think he resents him or curses his name? Just the opposite. He loves that coach, his first true father, and reveres his name, and sings his praises.

For the first time that young, undisciplined athlete had discovered what it meant to not be, in the words of Hebrews 12, “illegitimate” and fatherless. He experienced the greatest kind of love, that which cares enough about us to set the rules and boundaries and make sure we stay within them. Let's read the words of scripture again: “God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.”

### **The Goal of External Discipline**

The goal of all external discipline, what is imposed by parents and teachers and coaches and bosses and society itself, is never just to make us rule-keepers out of fear of consequences. The goal of external discipline is to create within us internal self-discipline. That's what makes the greatest difference: when we internalize the principles expressed in the external rules imposed on us, we willingly obey them and even go beyond them. There is no way we can ever have enough police officers to monitor and enforce every rule of the road. But our traffic usually flows in a safe way because nearly all drivers observe the rules willingly (they go the speed limit, stay in

their lanes, honor stoplights, etc.). Every parent raises their child with the hope that when they go out on their own to marriage or a career and mom and dad are no longer there to monitor their behavior daily, that son or daughter will make good choices, will not abuse their freedom, and will follow the rules of behavior taught and modeled by their parents.

In one of the memorable scenes of the classic film “Forrest Gump,” starring Tom Hanks, we see this principle demonstrated. The movie is actually a testimony to the impact a mother can have on a child. Sally Field, as Forrest’s mother, was an amazing single mom; with all her financial pressures, and a son who was not cognitively or socially normal, she loved him and guided him and laid down the values and rules that allowed him—surprisingly—to succeed in many unexpected ways. “Forrest Gump” would be an appropriate Mother’s Day movie!

As a young boy, Forrest is fitted with leg braces to correct his weak and undeveloped legs. And because he is “different” from the other children, he is a natural target for bullies. Some time later, while trying to escape the bullies who are chasing him, his braces fall off and Forrest discovers that he can run well and fast—“like the wind blows.” Those leg braces served as an “external discipline,” intended to protect and shelter Forrest’s leg bones until they grew to full strength. But once they had done their work, the external discipline was no longer needed. His legs now strong, Forrest becomes a world-class runner. That’s a metaphor or physical demonstration of an inner quality: the discipline imposed upon us, like leg braces, has the goal of developing our self-discipline.

### **The Path to True Freedom**

Self-discipline is the path to true freedom. When we have the strength to say no to temptations and distractions, and to resist the wrong pressures and opposition, we are free to say yes to the things that really matter and that can make us righteous and effective people. The best parents not only provide consistent discipline from the

very beginning of their child's life, be they do so without giving in to their emotions of frustration or anger or weariness. They make sure that rules and their unbendable consequences are also coupled with abundant affection, affirmation and encouragement to do what is right. And the best parents not only teach the rules to their kids, but also live them and model them.

Modern western culture is experiencing a **crisis of parenting**, and it can be traced back to fathers and mothers who don't know, or don't have the will and focus to practice, effective disciplining. Parents who have bought into naïve notions that children are naturally perfect and should be allowed to follow their impulses produce selfish and undisciplined offspring. Parents who care more about being their child's friend than their authority figure have forfeited the respect that every child should have for a mother and father. It's a very unhealthy cycle. Even schools feel hamstrung and limited in their ability to provide the discipline that has been neglected at home. No longer are principals and teachers seen as acting "in loco parentis" (in the place of parents). Generations of undisciplined or poorly disciplined young men and women, coddled and protected from consequences, given "participation trophies" and expecting "safe places," are a threat to our nation's backbone.

### **Growing as a Christian**

On a personal and spiritual level we find that discipline is just as essential to making progress as a Christian as it is for children in the home. Hebrews 12:9-10 lays out this comparison.

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits [that is, God] and live. [Our human parents] disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

The book was published 40 years ago and has lingered surprisingly as a Christian best-seller. It's called "Celebration of Discipline," and was written by college professor Richard Foster. I first heard of it (at a time when I was not too far along in my spiritual growth) and thought the title strange, an oxymoron or contradiction—like a dentist writing a book on "The Joys of Root Canals." Why would we **celebrate** discipline? Isn't discipline something inflicted upon us? Something we may have to endure? That hardly sounds like an excuse for a party!

Out of curiosity I decided to read it, and my eyes were opened. The classic "spiritual disciplines" that have been willingly practiced by believers in God for thousands of years can have a profound impact for good upon those who will try them. Practices such as prayer, study of scripture, fasting, solitude, service, confession and worship (which we are doing together today) are not ends in themselves. They are helpful means to the end of knowing God and ourselves better and living a better and more positive, meaningful life. We "celebrate" these disciplines because we recognize that they bear wonderful fruit. This is what Hebrews 12:11 confirms: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Some of you have experienced this when it comes to physical exercise. If you have not been practicing a regular lifestyle of exercise and activity, the first few times you take a mile walk or ride a bike or go to a gym seem incredibly hard—and your muscles may protest and be sore for a few days. But the more you keep it up, the more natural and easier it becomes. Repeating that discipline over and over turns it into a lifestyle, and you reap the benefits long-term. The same is true for the spiritual exercises: what at first seems difficult and foreign can become comfortable and enjoyable if we don't give up.

### **Circumstances as Discipline**

My final thought about God's discipline is that sometimes He causes or allows things we don't think we want in order to make us better.

While the “spiritual disciplines” Richard Foster writes about are choices we make and activities we initiate, there are also things that happen in life that are unbidden and unchosen. God can use these circumstances to shape us and correct our course and strengthen us. This is another way our Heavenly Father disciplines us.

Country music superstar Carrie Underwood had a serious accident several months ago, resulting in a wrist injury and lacerations to her beautiful face. She recently returned to public performing after months of recovery. In an interview, Carrie—a vocal Christian—described the impact of this unanticipated interruption in her life and career. While she never would have chosen the accident, she can see how God is using it. The time off from recording and traveling forced her to slow the hectic pace that she and her family were on. It helped her get back in touch in a closer way with the Lord. It deepened her marriage and her dependence on her husband. It reminded her of her true priorities.

Though all the physical scars seem to have healed perfectly, Carrie Underwood says she’s now a different person inside because of the discipline brought to her by that interruption. Is it possible that an injury, an illness, or an unexpected detour in life has been (or is being) used by God to change you, His beloved child, in some way? ■